

Yesterday in New Orleans, posters threatening to blow up private condos appeared downtown: "For every public housing unit destroyed, a condo will be destroyed. If there will be no homes for us, and relief from high rents, there will be no homes for the rich either! Sincerely, the angry & powerless."

[http://blog.nola.com/inyourownwords/2007/12/tensions\\_rise\\_over\\_public\\_hous.html](http://blog.nola.com/inyourownwords/2007/12/tensions_rise_over_public_hous.html)

Many here are interpreting the posters as an act mounted by the anarchists and New Black Panther Party agitators who descended on New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina with what may yet turn out to be a successful strategy to convert the poor and displaced with their gospel of intolerance and ignorance.

Meanwhile, the radio airwaves over New Orleans are being sewn with intolerance and ignorance from the other extreme of the ideological spectrum by uninformed, sensationalist right wing hosts – both local and syndicated – who suggest that the poor can't be served by high-density housing complexes (even though the rich are), that public housing buildings were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina (even though many never even flooded, and they remain among the best-built structures in the city), that they were crime-ridden compounds before the storm (ignoring the fact that the housing authorities bear much of the blame when residents themselves complained about the lack of security).

To be sure, public housing projects – like any form of taxpayer-funded assistance – is a bitter pill to swallow for those of us who bear the burden of paying the bill. Nevertheless, the enlightened among us also understand that poverty is an issue which every generation must contend. The very functioning of our society is based upon inequality. As Voltaire said, the rich require and abundance of the poor. Meanwhile, the problems of inequality, lack of education and opportunity, poor parenting, immoral influences, and the host of other root causes of poverty, will always be prevalent in society.

But we can't have a meaningful discussion on the issue if there is no space for civil dialog on our airwaves. It's absolutely essential to create those alternate spaces for dialog, in particular because we can't always rely upon public officials to allow citizens input into the public policy decisions they make. The public housing issue is a classic example of what can happen when public officials don't at least answer the concerns of advocates with reasonable explanations.

The same could be said of the rising racial tensions which emerged several months ago when critics of District Attorney Eddie Jordan were smeared as being racists by some of the same agitators who are arguing for public housing residents.

I abhor extremists of any stripe, but eliminate the spaces required for civil dialog and informed debate among moderates, and the ignorant in our society will go running for any extremist ideology which preaches a solution.

It is absolutely imperative, in my opinion, that the FCC use New Orleans as an instructive test case for what happens at the extremes of our troubled democracy when media consolidation is allowed to occur without concern for local input into programming decisions and diversity of ownership.

Here in New Orleans, it seems there is little room on the radio dial for objective information, meaningful discussion, and urgency on the issues of public housing, soaring crime rates, increasing racial tensions, lack of leadership in the rebuilding process, building and evaluating safer levees and restoring coastal wetlands, addressing the concerns of global warming and the possibility of sea level rises, as well as a wide range of other issues brought into sharp relief in south Louisiana by Hurricane Katrina.

All of these issues require an informed and civil debate in order for citizens to arrive at proper public policy decisions. Instead, we're subjected to right wing partisan ideologues who – for the sake of higher ratings among increasingly narrow market segments – have disparaged global warming science without presenting empirical evidence, increased dissension among races, vilified liberals, and generally denigrated the dignity of New Orleanians by suggesting that one of the world's most unique historic and cultural cities should not be rebuilt.

These are all viewpoints made by Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Mark Levin, among other syndicated and local hosts which, thanks to programming decisions made by out-of-state Clear Channel and Entercom corporations, have been thrust upon us in New Orleans.

Consider the rant yesterday by radio host Andre Trevigne, at the Clear Channel/Fox News affiliate 99.5 FM, who, owing to some personal incident with a non-English-speaking Hispanic, while ordering her breakfast, decided to go on a rampage against immigrants who don't learn English. A caller tried to tone down the discussion by offering the historical precedence of generations of immigrants – including Italians, Germans, and Jews (or even, as here in Louisiana, the French!) – who never learned English over the course of their lifetimes. When Trevigne angrily denied the caller an opportunity to respond, he answered, "Well, I guess there just wasn't conservative talk radio back then." Trevigne snapped, hanging up on the caller, and snorting, "This isn't conservative talk radio! This is independent radio!" Ironically, just moments later, Sean Hannity's "Stop Hillary Express" started broadcasting.

Consider how the other major provider of the talk radio format in New Orleans also provides only partisan Republican or right wing talk – in a situation which truly demands action by the FCC. Entercom communications decided to cancel the Air America syndicated progressive talk network which featured humorous, civil conversation in many cases (Al Franken, for example). Entercom then began using three of its licenses to broadcast virtually identical content, simulcasting the broadcast of

its flagship superstation 870 AM on 105.3 FM, and repeating the content later in the day on 1350 AM. As someone who was trying very hard recently to identify an NCE frequency which might serve New Orleans neighborhoods by providing them with a stage to amplify the conversations they have about rebuilding the city, I can think of no greater misappropriation of scarce radio spectrum than what Entercom is doing – hoarding three of its seven licenses to broadcast the same content – and I call on th

e FCC to investigate, and to penalize Entercom by confiscating those redundant licenses, and reassigning them to a more responsible entity in the New Orleans area.

Entercom and Clear Channel dominate the New Orleans market with a combined

All urban areas, it seems to me, have succumbed to the influence of corporate media consolidation narrowing the range of perspective and information offered to audiences.

I fail to see how allowing for further consolidation will remedy this crisis of narrow ideological content. I fail to comprehend how allowing cross-ownership of newspaper, television and radio will ever help to steer us back – or forward – to a place where a diversity of views is presented. I only see increasing repetition of content as the outcome.

What I'm concerned about is not so much that our society must confront a number of difficult challenges – for I believe that an informed citizenry will, ultimately, make the right decision. Winston Churchill said he loved Americans because they always made the right decision after they tried everything else.

I'm really more concerned about the fact that one of the most important mediums of information dissemination in the history of humanity has been subverted by private entities which have abused the public sphere, mining the value out of a public good by selling sensationalism to advertisers while sewing ignorance and hatred into our communities. Powerful media corporations like Clear Channel, Fox, and Entercom, have externalized the costs of their partisan activities, and left behind a toxic, noxious wasteland of the public airwaves.

Please don't allow media corporations even more of a stranglehold on our democracy!

Sincerely,

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